

Cherubim and Seraphim in the Bible and in the Light of Ancient Near Eastern Sources

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1. Introductory Remarks

Biblical Cherubim and Seraphim are superhuman beings.¹ In Apocrypha, Pseudepigraphia and later Jewish literature they belong to the angels closely connected to the symbolism of the (heavenly) abode of YHWH and to the temple of Jerusalem (cf. 1En 71:7: "And round about were the Seraphim, and the Cherubim and the Ophannim; these are they who do not sleep, but keep watch over the throne of his glory"²). They represent various aspects of YHWH's kingdom in heaven and on earth. Despite the fact that there are more allusions to these mythological beings in the Hebrew Bible the most important impact on their image in Jewish writings derived from the descriptions in the visionary reports in Isa 6 and Ezek 1-3; 8-11. These chapters, dealing, among other things, with the call of the prophets Isaiah and Ezekiel, were the primary sources for the rendering of angelic beings in texts such as the Sabbath Songs from Qumran (4Q405 20-21-22:8³), Sir 49:8; ApocMos 33; ApocAbr 18:12; 1En 61:10; 71:7 (all focussing on the [Cherubim] throne [chariot] of YHWH, the central issue of the imaginative reflections in later Jewish Merkabah mysticism⁴).

1 See Mettinger, Cherubim; Mettinger, Seraphim; Görg, Kerub; Jaroš, Seraf(im); Rüterswörden, *šāraṭ*; Freedman / O'Connor, *krûḥ*; cf. further the important contributions by Keel, Jahwe-Visionen, and Keel, Herrlichkeiterscheinung.

2 Citation taken from Sparks, Old Testament 255 (for the "ophannim" see below note 96).

3 See about the the angelic beings in the Sabbath Songs Löhr, Thronversammlung; Schwemer, Gott.

4 See, for example, the survey of the chariot mysticism in the Merkabah-literature by Sholem, Trends; Schäfer, Gott; cf. for rabbinical sources Ego, Himmel, for later Jewish Kabbalah Maier, Kabbalah.

The intention of this article is to give an overview of recent research on the religio-historical background of Cherubim and Seraphim (with special focus on iconographical sources from the Ancient Near East and Palestine [2.]). I will also give some exegetical remarks on the meaning of the Seraphim and Cherubim in the visionary contexts in Isaiah and Ezekiel (3.). One has to bear in mind that the information we derive from Isa 6 and the visions in Ezekiel is not simply identical with what we may presuppose as the ordinary knowledge an ancient Israelite reader might have had of these beings. Therefore it is necessary to distinguish between the use the authors of the visionary reports made of the Seraphim and Cherubim, in order to emphasize their message, and the common connotations related to them. The latter we can only try to reconstruct with reference to other biblical texts as well as to Ancient Near Eastern sources.

2. Seraphim and Cherubim in the Light of Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Sources

In the biblical texts we find a considerable number that is 91 occurrences of the term “cherub / Cherubim” (mostly related to YHWH as king, to the holy of holies of the temple and to the tabernacle of the Priestly Writer in the Pentateuch⁵). On the other hand, there are only seven occurrences of “Seraph / Seraphim” in five texts (see below 2.3). Bearing this in mind it is remarkable that only in Isa 6 we find an explicit connection between the Seraphim and the throne of YHWH, while otherwise in biblical references they seem to belong to different contexts. So the parallelism of Cherubim and Seraphim in later Jewish writings has to be taken primarily as the result of the influence a text as important as Isa 6 had on the tradition of YHWH as king. If one asks for older conceptions of Cherubim and Seraphim in the religion of ancient Israel one must follow carefully the two different traces indicated by the above mentioned number and distribution of the terms. Before we shall have a closer look at the two biblical terms separately, some *general features* of beings like Cherubim and Seraphim should be noted from the perspective of a history of religions of the Ancient Near East.

5 In this article I cannot deal with the concept of the Cherubim in the tabernacle of the Priestly Writer in more detail, but see, for example, Keel, *Herrlichkeitserscheinung* 151-156.

2.1 General Remarks on the so called “Mischwesen” in the Ancient Near East

Seraphim and Cherubim both belong to the so called “Mischwesen”, *hybrid figures*.⁶ This means that they are *combining attributes from various animals and from humans*, resulting in a new complex entity. Imaginary beings like that are common and widespread throughout the ancient cultures of Egypt, the Near East and Greece.⁷ They fulfil different functions in literary and iconographical contexts. One main area where they play an important role (apart from the sphere of demonology) is the *symbolism of ruling*, in both the realms of the divine and of humans.⁸ The addition of capabilities like flying (wings of eagles), physical power and fertility (the bull), threatening features and behaviour (e.g. the lion’s roar, talons of the eagle, scorpion’s tails, snake’s bites) and, finally, wisdom and skills (human heads⁹) culminate in pictures of superiority. We find such beings in the Ancient Near East especially in contexts where it seemed necessary *to represent power and to prevent from evil*.

Concerning their connection to myth especially one point is worth mentioning. In Ancient Mesopotamia an important relationship exists between the monsters of the army of Tiamat (the female pre-goddess and a snake-like dragon) and later symbolism of *guardians at gateways*. The mighty creatures of the time of cosmogony, which according to the *Enuma elish* once were defeated by Marduk himself, were transformed into *protective spirits*.¹⁰ This does not mean that they were not imagined as dangerous any more, but that they seemed mostly “domesticated” and salutary.¹¹ A certain ambiguity remained, thus.¹² In their role as guardian spirits they were not only connected to the *time* of the beginning of the world but also to *space*. Ancient city states very often fol-

6 See for a detailed comparison of biblical Cherubim and Ancient Near Eastern “Mischwesen” Metzger, *Königsthron* 309-325.

7 Cf. Welten, *Mischwesen*, and, with special regard to Mesopotamia, Wiggermann, *Mischwesen*; Green, *Mischwesen*; see further the reference-work Black / Green, *Gods*.

8 See, for example, with regard to the Achaemenid hybrid figures in the residences of the Great Kings, combining elements from different Ancient Near Eastern pictorial traditions, Root, *King*.

9 Concerning the ambivalence of the human parts of the “Mischwesen” and the question what connotations especially the human head might have had for antique thought see Wiggermann, *Mischwesen* 246, quoting approvingly C.J. Gadd and A.H. Layard (“the union of the greatest intellectual and physical powers”). For a different point of view see Keel, *Herrlichkeiterscheinung* 138-140.

10 Cf. especially Wiggermann, *Spirits*; Green, *Spirits*.

11 See Wiggermann, *Mischwesen* 246.

12 See Maul, *Sieg*.

lowed a cultural pattern which Mircea Eliade named the “*symbolism of centre*”.¹³ The powers of the universe were concentrated in the main city. The inhabitants of the city believed that its temples (and palaces) were (on a mythical level) identical with the cosmic abodes of the gods. This spatial symbolism involves distinctions between the higher and the lower regions of the world (*vertical dimension*) and between its inner and outer areas (*horizontal dimension*).¹⁴ When the ancient mind travels (in reality or imagination) through peripheral regions, the inhabitants of the distant lands seem to be strange and dangerous. So, the “*Mischwesen*” often were depicted as non-humans and monsters in opposition to men (for example, the scorpion-people at the entrance of the gate of the sun in the Gilgamesh epic or the *anzû*-bird as a beast of the far away mountainous regions). When tracing the traditional background of the biblical Cherubim and Seraphim, this symbolism of time and space should be remembered.

2.2 The Cherubim

The etymology of the Hebrew word *kērûb* has been debated for a long time. Consensus today is the possible connection with the akkadian term *kāribu* / fem. *kāribtu*, “one who blesses”.¹⁵ It denotes huge guardian figures at the gateways of Neo-Assyrian palaces. These sculptures, normally a combination of a winged bull or lion with a human head, served as *beneficient (but nonetheless ambivalent) protective figures*. This may be comparable with biblical notions. The most comprehensive description of the Cherubim in the bible is in 1Kgs 6:23-27(28). The deuteronomistic report deals with the interior equipment of the Solomonic temple.¹⁶ According to this text, which may have preserved older traditions from pre-exilic times, the Cherubim belong to the Debir, presumably a wooden cubical structure whose predecessors and parallels

13 Cf. Eliade, *Kosmos* 25-29, and Eliade, *Religionen* 423-444.

14 See the contributions in: Janowski / Ego, *Weltbild*, especially the introduction by Janowski (3-26).

15 Cf. for the Akkadian term AHW I 449; CDA² 149; see for the Hebrew word with regard to the etymological question HALAT, 2. Lieferung 473; Ges¹⁸, 3. Lieferung 570.

16 See for the analysis of 1Kgs 6 the commentaries by Noth, *Könige I* 95-129, Würthwein, *Buch* 57-70. The problem of the historical value of 1Kgs 6-7 has been debated in the last years (see, for example, van Seters, *Solomon's Temple*, who denies any reliable information with regard to the pre-exilic temple, while, on the other hand, Zwickel, *Tempel*, trusts the text in detail). It is very likely that especially the comparable large measures of the temple and its features must be taken as a literary phenomenon, aiming at the greatness of the Israelite God, while other details (like the Cherubim throne as the central cultic symbol) seem trustworthy.

seem to be Phoenician and Egyptian *naiskoi*, the innermost chapels of the sanctuaries, serving as throne-rooms for the gods represented by their statues.¹⁷ The text in 1Kgs 6 reports that the Cherubim were large sculpted objects made of “oil wood” and covered with gold. The text depicts the two Cherubim as standing side by side and facing the entrance of the shrine. Thus, people entering the main temple room (the Hekhal) would have encountered the two creatures in the Debir face to face. Bearing in mind this spatial position as well as iconographical evidence (see below) it is probable that they served as *the porters and guardians of the throne of YHWH*. This is further supported by the special focus on the position of the Cherubim’s wings in the chapter. According to 1Kgs 6:27 their outer wings were held close to the body, while the inner wings were outstretched at the same height, meeting in the middle and forming a kind of seat.¹⁸

2.2.1 The Cherubim as Porters of the Throne of YHWH and Iconographical Evidence

W.F. Albright once realized that the description in 1Kgs 6 fits well with *iconographical motifs from Palestine and Phoenicia*.¹⁹ In this light it is the well-known *Egyptian sphinx* which offers the next parallel to the shape of the biblical Cherubim. The theory is widely accepted.²⁰ The most famous examples from the vicinity of ancient Israel are from Byblos and Megiddo. They depict rulers sitting on thrones flanked by winged lions with human heads. The Ahirom-sarcophagus (Fig. 1, 13th-12th century BCE) shows the king presumably at a funeral meal. In front of him is a small table with bread and fruits. Behind the table attendants offer gifts. From Megiddo came some carved ivories, dedicated to the subject, and a small throne model (all dating from the late Bronze age, 14th-12th century BCE). On the most famous ivory carving the king of the city is pictured twice (Fig. 2): on the left he sits on the sphinx throne surrounded by servants, his wife and high officials. On the right he

17 Cf. for the architectural structure of the temple of Jerusalem Weippert, Palästina 461-476, especially 464 (about the Debir); see further Zwickel, Tempel 71-83 (“Die Innenverkleidung und der Schrein”); Keel, Welt 133-150, especially 139-144 (about the Debir and Egyptian and Phoenician parallels).

18 For the position of the wings of the Cherubim see Keel, Jahwe-Visionen 23-29, and Keel, Herrlichkeitserscheinung 137-138; Metzger, Königsthron 335-367.

19 Cf. Albright, Cherubim; see further about the identifications of the Cherubim with Ancient Near Eastern hybrid figures in the research of the 20th century Metzger, Königsthron 312-318.

20 Especially since Keel refined the identification, cf. Keel, Jahwe-Visionen 15-35.

rides on a chariot in front of which two defeated enemies are walking (according to their hair-style they belong to Palestinian nomads – the *shasu* of the Egyptian sources). This Megiddo ivory illustrates well the above mentioned connection of the representation of power with the motif of the Cherubim (sphinx) throne. Going back to Egypt, we find thrones of the Pharaoh from the New Kingdom and earlier, flanked by lions (sometimes also with pictures of sphinxes defeating enemies on the armchair²¹). The figure of the sphinx was a prevalent Egyptian symbol both of the king and of the Sun-God.²² Since the 7th century BCE., there are many examples of male and female deities on a sphinx throne from Phoenician homelands and from the colonies (especially Carthage, cf. Fig. 3). Mostly the enthroned deities are sitting under a canopy or in a chapel (often with winged sun discs above it). There they greet and accept worshippers depicted usually standing in front of the throne. This scenery is modelled on the image of an audience before a ruler – a very well known topic in ancient societies. It offers the closest iconographical parallel to the psalms where supplicants seek contact with YHWH in the same language reserved otherwise to courtly audiences.²³

So, the iconographical type of a king or deity sitting on his Cherubim throne may well be an old cultural heritage in Israel. This should even be true despite the fact that in the biblical writings there is no clear evidence for the concept in pre-exilic times. In the presumably old visionary report of Isa 6 the Cherubim are not mentioned (see below). On the other hand the occurrences of the epitheton YHWH ... *yōšēb hak-k'rubīm*, "YHWH enthroned on the Cherubim", in the Psalms and otherwise, seem all to be later than exile (1Sam 4:4, 2Sam 6:2 // 1Chr 16:6, Ps 80:2; 99:1, Isa 37:16 // 2Kgs 19:15). The single cherub in Ps 18:11 // 2Sam 22:11, serving as YHWH's heavenly "driving vehicle" (connected with the verb *rākab*), is somewhat different. The theophany conception of Ps 18, mentioning the cherub, seems to be influenced by the throne conception of Jerusalem and by Ancient Near Eastern images of special beasts attributed to gods as well.²⁴ Even if many modern scholars date the psalms in question in the Persian or Hellenistic periods

21 Cf. Metzger, Königsthron Plate 32, Fig. 231a, 231c, 232 (armchairs of thrones from the reign of Thutmosis IV); cf. Keel, Jahwe-Visionen 90 Fig. 49.

22 See, for example, Bonnet, Sphinx.

23 Cf. Hartenstein, "Angesicht Gottes", and, more detailed, Hartenstein, Angesicht JHWHs.

24 See also, for example, Mettinger, Dethronement 32-36 (with the thesis that the single cherub in Ps 18 evokes the concept of the theophany of YHWH, the storm-god, driving in his heavenly war chariot). See further Hartenstein, Wolkendunkel 129-134.

there are good reasons to believe *that important contents dealing with the symbolism of the temple of Jerusalem derived from earlier traditions*.²⁵ It is a matter of fact that in the Ancient Near East basic cultic conceptions of a sanctuary do not change so much during the centuries. This can further be illustrated by two interesting details: the relationship of the Cherubim to the *stylized tree* and the question of *aniconism* of YHWH in the temple.

2.2.2 The Cherubim as Guardians of the “Holy Tree”

In 1Kgs 6 the Cherubim are not only mentioned as a pair of sculpted figurines in the Debir, but also as a part of the decoration carved on the walls and the doors of the Hekhal.²⁶ According to 1Kgs 6:29,32,35 and Ezek 41:17-20 (cf. Gen 3:24; Ezek 28:14,16) they were depicted there as *guardians of the sacred tree*. We cannot follow here in detail the ongoing debate on this widespread, archaic iconographical motif.²⁷ But one should notice that the Phoenician art of the Iron Age shows a lot of examples of sphinxes or griffins (sometimes also with ibexes or goats) flanking the stylized tree which – combining attributes of various plants – belongs surely to the divine world.²⁸ However, there is not only one singular meaning of the “holy tree” throughout the Ancient Near East. One must try to reconstruct possible connotations due to every context.²⁹ Having this in mind, the sphinxes, flanking stylized trees in the Iron Age art of Phoenicia and Palestine (Fig. 4), seemed to be closely connected to the *representation of power*, too (divine and human kingdom).³⁰ The iconographical evidence fits in well with those biblical texts which also show the Cherubim as guardians of the *garden of YHWH* (Gen 3:24; cf. Ezek 28:11-19) and as symbols of his *world order* (temple decoration). The symbolism of the temple in the psalms involves fertility and beneficence for all living creatures (cf. Ps 36; 104:14-15,27-28; 136:25; 145:15-16; 147:7-8), granted by YHWH, the creator in his residence.³¹ Being supporting figures of the throne and guardians of

25 Cf., among others, Janowski, Keruben, and Janowski, Wohnung.

26 Cf. especially Metzger, Keruben, and Metzger, Jahwe.

27 See, for example, Metzger, Zeder, and Metzger, Weltenbaum; Hartenstein / Jeremias, “JHWH” 92-111; Keel / Uehlinger, Göttingen 237-321.

28 See the pictures of the motif on seals and ivories in the literature cited in the preceding note.

29 See for the methodological questions Hartenstein, Ikonographie.

30 See Keel / Uehlinger, Göttingen 265-266.

31 Cf. Metzger, Keruben.

the tree (of "life" Gen 2-3) the biblical Cherubim belong to the innermost sphere of *YHWH Zebaoth*, "YHWH of Hosts".³² So, the correspondance between the primeval garden (the "paradise") and the temple decoration seems well recognizable with regard to the Cherubim. In Gen 3:24 Cherubim are ordered to watch over the passage to the tree of life (in this context probably a symbol of YHWH himself). And in the difficult passage Ezek 28:11-19 there is also a cherub in the garden of Eden.³³ In the centre of that mythic place the Phoenician king of Tyre seems to live in a godlike manner. According to Ezek 28:14 the cherub seems also to fulfil the function of a *protective spirit* (of the king?). One can assume that the biblical Cherubim were connected with a symbolism of centre (see above). Concerning the iconographical and textual evidence, it shows Phoenician influence. The Cherubim obviously participate both in the mythic *time* of the primeval origins (the symbolism of the garden of God) and in the mythic *space* of YHWH's abode (the holy tree of the temple decoration).

2.2.3 The Question of Aniconism related to the Throne of YHWH

A second aspect of the above mentioned concept of the Cherubim throne seems important: the question of *aniconism*. Much has been written in the last decade on this topic.³⁴ Being well aware of the fact that some scholars now prefer the hypothesis of an anthropomorphic cult statue of YHWH in the pre-exilic temple, there are better reasons to assume that the throne of YHWH was empty.³⁵ Bronze Age sanctuaries in Palestine and in Syria had a remarkable tradition of what the Hebrew bible calls *maššēbôt*, "standing stones". In the context of cultic installations they probably served as symbols of the gods (or deified ancestors) and seemed to designate in some cases also a symbolical entrance or doorway. Therefore, they embodied in one and the same object the main features of a sanctuary. That is probably why they were called *betyl* / *baitylos*, "house of god" (cf. the biblical etiology of the

32 See the general remarks on the concept by Mettinger, Yahweh, and Mettinger, De-thronement 19-37; for the connection with Gen 2-3 see, for example, Hartenstein, Beobachtungen 282-286.

33 See for Ezek 28,11-19 Zimmerli, Ezechiel II 671-689, for the cherub on the mountain 684-86.

34 See for a documentation of the ongoing debate van der Toorn, Image; Janowski / Zchomelidse, Sichtbarkeit.

35 See for the thesis of an anthropomorphic statue of YHWH the contributions by Niehr, Search, and Uehlinger, Cult Statuary, – and, for the contrary point of view, Mettinger, Aniconism.

sanctuary of Bethel in Gen 28).³⁶ In Arad, the only undoubtedly Iron Age Judaeen sanctuary excavated until today, a single stone stele, without any pictorial elements, was the representation of YHWH in the niche. Furthermore, O. Keel pointed to the fact that biblical references to the ark sometimes speak of (two) stones connected with this bin-shaped object.³⁷ There are no grave arguments against the hypothesis that aniconic traditions of representing YHWH may well be of old origin in Palestine. In his monograph “No Graven Image?” T.N.D. Mettinger gave a comprehensive overview of aniconism in the Ancient Near East.³⁸ There are especially Phoenician examples from the 7th century B.C.E. onwards which combine the symbol of a sphinx (Cherubim) throne either with an empty seat (“empty space aniconism”) or, interesting enough, with a betyl on the back of the seat (Fig. 5a-b, a combination with the standing stone symbolism³⁹).

Concerning the *mental image* ancient Israelites may have had confronting such objects there can be no doubt that *the shape of YHWH was anthropomorphic*.⁴⁰ But this had not necessarily to be realized in a material representation. One has to distinguish between a “mental iconography”⁴¹, based for example on the images from cultic poetry (such as the Psalms), and pictures on material objects. The pre-exilic Cherubim throne participates in both fields. It was a concrete symbol of YHWH as king without showing his figure. Then the explicit prohibition of images in Israel (during and after the exile) was formulated in using an old cultural heritage of “aniconism” as a distinctive mark of Jewish religion.⁴²

2.3 The Seraphim

The term “Seraphim” (*šrāpīm*) is the plural form of *šārāp* whose etymology, as in the case of the “Cherubim”, is still a matter of dispute. The most likely theory connects it with the Hebrew verb *šārāp*, “to burn /

36 See Ribichini, Baetyl.

37 See Keel, Jerusalemer Tempel 262-264, who guesses that – similar to Bedouin sanctuaries – it may have been originally only one stone connected with the ark.

38 Mettinger, Image.

39 Cf. Mettinger, Image 100-106 (sphinx thrones from Sidon); Metzger, Königsthron 275-276; cf. Metzger, Kerubenthroner 113-116, for the decoration of these thrones with the “holy tree”.

40 See Smith, Form; Hartenstein, “Gestalt”, and Hartenstein, Angesicht JHWHs.

41 For this terminology cf. Mettinger, Image 20.

42 See the contributions by Hossfeld, Werden, and Frevel, Bildnis.

to destroy".⁴³ Then the "Seraphim" should refer to beings which were able to annihilate and to incinerate by flames. Therefore, a description like the "*burning ones*" seems to be adequate. In Isa 6:2-4 the Seraphim are described as (at least two) beings "standing above him", that is over the head of the enthroned figure of YHWH (see below, 3.2). So, in the vision, which evokes the setting of the divine council, the verb *ʿamad*, usually designating servants who stand in front of their seated master (with *ʿal*, "before"), is specified with regard to the unique creatures: according to v.2 they have (three pairs of) *wings*, holding them in the air. Despite the fact that the Seraphim in Isa 6 seem to have anthropomorphic features, too (a voice able to utter human words, but also to shatter the door [v.3-4; cf. the speech in v.7], and a hand to take a charcoal from the altar and to interact with the prophet [v.6-7]), most modern scholars agree that they should be taken here as *serpent-like beings*. This conclusion is based on two arguments: The other biblical occurrences of the term show them in proximity to serpents, and, furthermore, there is clear evidence from iconographical sources of the Iron Age art of Palestine in the 8th-7th century BCE that the image of winged serpents played an important role (probably as protective spirits), especially in Judah. To give a more detailed view of this thesis I will start with the *biblical notions*.

2.3.1 Biblical Notions of the Seraphim beside Isa 6⁴⁴

In Isa 14:29 (an oracle against the Philistines) and in Isa 30:6 (an announcement of judgement against the people of Jerusalem who seek support from Egypt) there is found a "flying Seraph" (like in Isa 6:2). In Isa 14:29 the term is used as a metaphor designating very likely the dreadful power of the new Assyrian successor to the throne (in a climactic arrangement of serpent, viper, winged Seraph the last is most emphasized). In Isa 30:6 we learn about the geographical realm where one imagined to encounter the "flying Seraph": "Through a land of dire distress, the haunt of lioness and roaring lion, poisonous snake and flying Seraph they carry their goods [that is the gifts for Egypt] on the backs of donkeys".⁴⁵ Very similar in this regard are Deut 8:15 and Num 21:6,8. Serpent-like Seraphim are depicted there as the dangerous in-

43 See Mettinger, Seraphim; Jaroš, Seraf(im); Rütterswörden, *šārap*.

44 See Hartenstein, Unzugänglichkeit 191-196; Rütterswörden, *šārap* 887-891; Keel, Jahwe-Visionen 71-74.

45 Translation taken from Blenkinsopp, Isaiah 412 (with alteration "flying seraph" instead of "flying serpent").

habitants of distant desert regions, too (together with scorpions [Deut 8:15], and as a plague, caused by YHWH, together with other snakes [Num 21:6,8]). So, in four of a total of five texts (with the exception of Isa 6) the Seraphim participate in the *symbolism of the desert* – a zone of lifelessness and terror. Like in the above mentioned mythical geography in other Ancient Near Eastern cultures the desert in biblical thought was not only the region of the origins where the people once met their god. In most cases it is merely the opposite to the promised land where YHWH guaranteed life, wealth and prosperity.⁴⁶ Remarkably also the Assyrian ruler Esarhaddon, in his report on the campaign against the Arabs and Egypt (which may be contemporary to the Isaianic references), speaks of beasts of the desert, characterized as “two-headed serpents” and (serpent-like?) beings “whose wings were batting”.⁴⁷ Henri Frankfort, in his famous essay on the status of reality ancient men conceded to dreams and visions, once has noted with regard to this text: “Hallucinations, too, are real. We find in the official annals of Asarhaddon of Assyria a record of fabulous monsters – two-headed serpents and green, winged creatures – which the exhausted troops had seen in the most trying section of their march, the arid Sinai Desert.”⁴⁸ As a result, we should bear in mind that in Isa 6 Seraphim are described as winged superhuman beings, surrounding the throne of YHWH. But the lack of any more detailed description leaves us in doubt what shape they would have. In the light of the above cited additional biblical notions it is likely that in Isa 6 they should be serpent-like, too (despite their simultaneous human attributes). We should further be aware of the biblical Seraphim as related to the desert and to other dangerous beasts living there. Is this true for Isa 6 as well? The *iconographical approach* helps to prepare for an answer which the exegetical remarks will finally try to give (see below 3.2).

2.3.2 The Iconographical Evidence from Palestine (Winged Serpents)

Focussing on the motif of *winged serpents on Iron Age stamp seals* from Palestine (Fig. 6a-b) K. Joines and O. Keel voted for their snake-like appearance in Isa 6, too.⁴⁹ Other scriptural references besides Isa 6 and the archaeological findings seem to fit in with one another. The tradi-

46 See for the symbolism of the desert in the Hebrew Bible Talmon, *midbār*.

47 Citation taken from ANET³ 292(3) (10th campaign: annalistic text BM K 3082 + S 2027 + K 3086, reverse); cf. Borger, *Inschriften* 112-113; see further Wiseman, *Serpents*.

48 Frankfort, *Introduction* 12.

49 Joines, *Serpents*; Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen* 74-110.

tional background of the Palestinian pictures of serpents is – comparable to the Cherubim – an *ancient Egyptian figure, the “uraeus”*.⁵⁰ The term is a loan-word from Greek, taken to designate *the cobra* which plays an important role in Egyptian symbolism. Cobra figures were worn at the forehead of the Pharaoh and of the gods to protect them by their mighty “fire” (that is their poison). So, the word “flame” is one of the Egyptian designations for the uraeus, presumably a more than accidental parallel to the above mentioned Hebrew etymology of “Seraph”. Even if there were other attempts to enlighten the traditional background of the Seraphim (such as griffins, winged human figures and Baal’s seven thunders and lightning bolts⁵¹) the trace back to the Egyptian cobra seems the most plausible. With regard to Isa 6 two points at last have to be mentioned: The winged uraei on Palestinian scarabs and seals have two or four wings, but never six as in the vision of Isaiah (cf. *Fig. 6a-b*; so, the author of the report very likely took the liberty of characterizing them differently⁵²). And their unique position “above” the enthroned YHWH, which for later interpreters was sometimes offensive, could be perhaps explained with regard to architectural friezes at the top of Egyptian and Phoenician chapels, showing rows of uraei (without wings, *Fig. 8*).⁵³ Some examples of the iconographical motif from Israel and Judah finally show the uraei even together with the holy tree, with griffins and sphinxes / Cherubim (*Fig. 7, cf. Fig. 6b*). So, it is not impossible that in ancient Israel and Judah they belonged to the guardian figures of YHWH’s abode even before Isa 6 was written. Another theory is that they were not much related to the “official” cult, but played an important role in “popular religion”.⁵⁴ In any case the author of Isa 6 picked them up to emphasize his message. He did this in spite of the fact that the more common Cherubim would have been the first choice to picture the enthroned YHWH. So, *it has to be explained why in Isa 6 the serpent-like Seraphim play such an important role*. Bringing them into the temple (of course in a visionary context) Isa 6 added some new qualities to them, and even altered their appearance. The same was true with the Cherubim in the later visions of Ezekiel (see below). So, it has been

50 Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen* 83-92; Mettinger, *Seraphim*.

51 See for the thesis of a derivation from Egyptian griffins Görg, *Funktion*; Morenz / Schorch, *Seraph*, and, alternatively, the reasons to assume winged anthropomorphic figures listed by Rüterswörden, *šarāp* 889-890; for an identification with the weapons of the storm-god see Day, *Echoes*.

52 Cf. Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen* 110-114.

53 See Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen* 92-103.

54 Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen* 116-121; Görg, *Funktion* 217-222.

– as stated above – the rendering of the authors of the prophetic visions that formed the later image of the Seraphim and Cherubim.

3. Seraphim and Cherubim in the Visionary Reports in Isa 6 and Ezek 1-3; 8-11

3.1 General Remarks on Exegetical Approaches to the Prophetic Writings

In modern research the approach to understand the peculiarity of Old Testament prophecy has changed remarkably. The influential picture of the prophets, established by famous scholars of the early 20th century such as B. Duhm, H. Gunkel and G. Hölscher, depended on the image of “great spiritual persons”. The prophets, considered to be religious geniuses, warned the people because of their sins and tried to reestablish ethics in order to fulfil the will of YHWH which had been abandoned. Most modern scholars now agree that such an image was indebted to the deuteronomistic point of view since the 7th century BCE. But this cannot exclude that there were forerunners among the prophets who in turn influenced later Deuteronomists. In any case, one must distinguish between the *literate shape* of prophetic scriptures (later transformed into book-compositions) and the *oral messages* of the prophets, restricted to certain historical situations. For example, Jörg Jeremias pointed out in his commentaries that *the border between scriptural and oral prophecy must be taken as a one-way passage*.⁵⁵ We do not have the means to reestablish earlier oral stages due to the fact that from the beginning the literary shape of prophetic writings depended on *selection and addition*. What we can try to describe are the writings as products of an ongoing revision (“Fortschreibung”⁵⁶). The hermeneutical process of the growth of the prophetic books in itself is a matter of great interest for modern research. Applying the methods of *redactional and traditional history* scholars try to identify what stages of the literary process enriched the original writings which were a literary phenomenon from the very beginning.

However, it is still a matter of constant dispute what made the Israelite prophecy special in the context of Ancient Near Eastern omens and

55 Jeremias, Prophet Hosea, and Jeremias, Prophet Amos, and Jeremias, Propheten.

56 See, for example, Steck, Prophetenbücher.

oracles.⁵⁷ Here we cannot follow the discussion in detail, but should bear in mind that it is more probable that the Israelites and Judaeans created prophetic literature not only as an undertaking to cope with the downfalls of their communities in 722 / 720 and 587 BCE. Prophetic literature in Israel, then, would have had only a retrospective point of view, creating oracles of judgement as *vaticinia ex eventu*. In my opinion it is more likely that the documentation of prophetic messages started in the 8th century BCE because in current oracles, dealing with future punishment through YHWH, *historical events seemed to be truly predicted*. Thus, the beginning of prophetic literature could be compared with a king's archive where important documents of his reign were stored.⁵⁸ Likewise, YHWH, the (heavenly) king, stored his messages to the people and their leaders through the prophets by literary means. So, later generations – in re-reading the prophetic writings – were enabled to understand better why and what the course of history was from YHWH's point of view.

The visionary reports of Isa 6 and Ezek 1-3; 8-11 are important for the debate outlined above. Both are explicitly situated by dates in critical historical situations (Isa 6:1; Ezek 1:1) and both *give essential clues to the intention of the literary units they introduce*. Isa 6, other than Ezek 1-3, does not prelude the whole book of Isaiah, but is the beginning of the so called "*Denkschrift*", "*Isaian memoir*", which encompasses Isa 6-8(9)*. These chapters are commonly accepted as one of the old nucleuses of the book of Isaiah. They seem to originate in the end of the 8th or the first half of the 7th century BCE.⁵⁹ With regard to the topic of this article it should be noted that – despite other scholarly opinions⁶⁰ – such a date for the vision of Isaiah fits in well with the pictorial language used in the text. The Seraphim in Isa 6 especially support this date in the light of the above mentioned iconographical evidence.

On the other hand, concerning the visions of the heavenly throne sphere in Ezek 1-3; 8-11 it is clear that their elaborate poetic language derived from ancient Mesopotamian sources and, similarly, from former Jerusalem traditions. Both were combined to form something new (see below 3.3). A date in the exilic period would be most convenient to explain the singular synthesis. We shall now have a closer look at the rendering of Seraphim and Cherubim in these texts.

57 Cf. the different points of view by Jeremias, Proprium, and Kratz, *Propheten*.

58 See Hartenstein, *Archiv*.

59 Cf. especially the detailed analysis and interpretation by Barthel, *Prophetenwort*.

60 Cf. Kaiser, Buch; Becker, *Jesaja*.

3.2 The Seraphim in Isa 6⁶¹

The vision of the prophet is dated in “the year king Uzziah died” (Isa 6:1), that is about the year 734 BCE. Deaths of kings in the Ancient Near East often were acknowledged as times of crisis and as signs of a disturbed world-order. Therefore, the situative context of the vision Isa 6 presumably is not accidental. Furthermore, the redactors situate the following chapters Isa 7-8 in the historical setting of the so called “Syro-Ephraimite crisis”. Within the broader framework of the Assyrian expansion to the west Isa 7 focusses on the political behaviour of the Judaeans facing the fear of the coalition of Israel (Ephraim) and the Aramaeans of Damascus. Chapter 8:1-4 is the conclusion of this topic, addressing the king and his attendants, while Isa 8:6-8 are dealing primarily with the false loyalties of the inhabitants of Jerusalem and their consequences (announcement of an imminent Assyrian occupation of Judah). The whole “memoir” Isa 6-8 intentionally summarizes the message of Isaiah from about 734 to 701 BCE. The chapters are based on oracles given at different times.⁶² The selection of prophetic oracles was arranged – presumably in the first half of the 7th century BCE – to a kind of report, a document of YHWH “hiding his face” from Judah (cf. Isa 8:16-18). Finally, this “memoir” has been situated at the beginning of Isaiah’s activity (about 734-733 BCE, cf. Isa 6:1). The visionary narrative Isa 6, thus, should be read as closely related to the forthcoming political events and gives an interpretation for them from YHWH’s point of view.

There has been an intensive scholarly dispute whether Isa 6 mirrors *the inaugural call of the prophet* or whether it should be taken as *a report of the prophet’s commissioning with a special (political) mission* in the divine assembly.⁶³ Judging from the literary position the composers of the “memoir” assigned to Isa 6 there are better arguments to support the latter. Nevertheless, some features of the vision show similarities to other prophetic call narratives (Jer 1; Ezek 1-3). Bearing this in mind we shall look at the first scene of the text (v.1-4):

“1 In the year king Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting on a throne raised up high, while his hems filled (verb *mālē*) the throne room (*hēka*). 2 Seraphim were standing from above him. Each had six (pair of) wings. With two they

61 See for this section Hartenstein, Unzugänglichkeit.

62 Isa 7 includes two former oracles from the time of king Ahas (about 733 BCE); Isa 8:1-4 can be dated at the time before 720 BCE, while Isa 8:6-8 seems to mirror the situation before the siege of Jerusalem in 701 BCE.

63 See for a discussion of the problem Steck, Bemerkungen; Keel, Jahwe-Visionen 46 note 2; Hartenstein, Unzugänglichkeit 24-28; 205-216; Liss, Prophetie 34-71, especially 55-60.

covered their faces, and with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And one cried out to the other saying, 'Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of Hosts; the whole earth is full (substantive *m^elō*) of his glory'. 4 And the 'pegs' of the threshold shook by the sound of the voice of the one who cried, and the house began to fill (verb *mālē*) with smoke."

The first part of the vision is situated in a setting that includes elements of the temple, and, simultaneously, of the mythical abode of YHWH.⁶⁴ The "thresholds" and the "house" in v.4 clearly belong to the architectural features of the sanctuary. On the other hand, the very high throne in v.1 and the huge figure of the seated god, indicated by the "hems" of his garment, transcend the spatial dimensions of the building. It is still a matter of debate whether the relation of the temple to the divine is expressed in Isa 6 in a traditional way or with certain innovative features.⁶⁵

However, it is evident that the narrative especially stresses two elements: The *divine holiness* and the *special circumstances of the revelation of this holiness in the vision*. The Seraphim are a decisive part of the latter. As stated above, they never appear connected with the divine throne apart from the vision in Isa 6. So, the fact that they are described in much more detail than YHWH himself is remarkable. We do not get any hint in the text where exactly their position is, in relation to the throne. Bearing in mind the principles of *symmetry* and *frontality* in Ancient Near Eastern art, one may suppose that they *flank the throne on two sides*. If that is right there are perhaps only *two* Seraphim assumed in the vision (nevertheless, the formula in v.3 "and one cried out to the other" not exclusively denotes only two⁶⁶). We also do not know whether they are looking in the same direction as YHWH or whether they are facing him (as indicated by the verb *ʿamad* in v.1). Most emphasized are their *very loud voices* that make the thresholds tremble, and, thus, (implicitly) the whole building (v.4a). The sound evokes the thunder-like voice of YHWH (cf. Ps 29). The use of the singular form ("by the sound of the voice of *the one* who cried", v.4a) seems to confirm this.⁶⁷ The Seraphim in Isa 6:1-4, therefore, act *in a unity with their lord*, magnifying the power of the "king, YHWH of Hosts" (v.5). What exactly, then, is the function of the – presumably serpent-like – beings in the vision? The answers depend on different understandings of the vision as a whole.

64 See especially Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen* 47-56; Metzger, *Wohnstatt*; Hartenstein, *Unzugänglichkeit* passim, especially 11-23.

65 See, for example, Irsigler, *Gott* 142-43; Hartenstein, *Unzugänglichkeit* 41-56.

66 For a discussion cf. Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen* 114-115; Irsigler, *Gott* 143-144 note 41.

67 Cf. Hartenstein, *Unzugänglichkeit* 186.

1) The most common interpretation focusses on the *holiness of god* in v.3 ("Holy, holy, holy is YHWH of Hosts"). O. Keel and others refer to the fact that the Seraphim have to *cover their bodies*, from head to feet (v.2).⁶⁸ So, the mighty creatures are not able (or allowed) to look at the face of the Holy One – this was indeed the way later Jewish interpreters understood the vision. That the author (in the 8th or 7th century BCE) chose just these very winged creatures is then explained by the widespread iconography on seals (see above) and their possible veneration as magical protective spirits at the time. In bringing them into the temple the author of Isa 6 would have used them to emphasize YHWH's greatness.⁶⁹

2) I would like to state a somewhat different view. In my dissertation I tried to reconstruct the traditio- and religio-historical background of Isa 6 as well as the intention of the vision in its literary and political context.⁷⁰ Two interrelated observations lead me to understand Isa 6 as a *vision of judgement*:⁷¹ In v.1-4 it has often been overlooked that the "Leitwort" (key word) *mālē*, "to fill / to be full with", is essential for the thematic structure.⁷² There is an equivalence of YHWH's garment *filling* the throne room (v.1) and the smoke *filling* the whole house (v.4b). And further there is a correspondence of YHWH's presence in the temple, indicated by his (presumably shining) garments (v.1), and his *kābôd*, "splendour / glory", in the world (v.3: "the whole earth is *full* of his glory"). E. Cassin, in her excellent monograph on the divine splendour in Ancient Mesopotamia, showed how such symbolic equations were common in temple concepts of the Ancient Near East.⁷³ It seems not to be pure coincidence, then, that in the well-known Hittite myth of the disappearance of the god Telipinu the motif of *the temple filled with smoke* indicates the vanishing of the angry storm-god, while – as a consequence – *the whole country turns to waste*.⁷⁴ In my opinion this is a surprising parallel to Isa 6, where, in v.11, we read the following:

68 Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen* 110-114.

69 Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen* 113; 124.

70 Hartenstein, *Unzugänglichkeit*.

71 A somewhat similar interpretation as a vision of judgement was given before by Knierim, *Vocation*, and by Steck, *Bemerkungen*.

72 See more detailed Hartenstein, *Unzugänglichkeit* 78-109.

73 Cassin, *Splendeur*.

74 See the texts in: Hoffner, *Hittite Myths* 14-37. It is remarkable that – despite the different gods and goddesses of whom the disappearance is reported – there is the constant formula of divine absence: "Mist seized the windows. Smoke [seized] the house" which is repeated vice versa as the first sign of the return of the god who has been reconciled: "Telipinu came back home to his house and took account of his land. The mist released the windows, the smoke released the house." (Hoffner 14; 17;

"Then I asked, 'How long, O Lord?' And he replied, 'Until cities lie deserted without inhabitants, houses without occupants, and the land left a waste / desolation (*šmāmāh*).'"

Isa 6 seems to presuppose a similar cultural concept of the correspondence between divine presence and absence in the temple on the one hand, and life and wealth versus lifelessness and desolation in the world on the other. That the temple is "full of smoke" (Isa 6:4) should be interpreted, then, not only as a mere temporary phenomenon, but as a symbol foreshadowing the judgement of v.11. It evokes the concept of YHWH "hiding his face" in anger (Isa 8:17). This is supported by the common semantical opposition of *m^elō*, 'fullness' (Isa 6:3), and *šmāmāh*, 'waste / desolation / emptiness' (Isa 6:11), in the Hebrew Bible.⁷⁵ Bearing all this in mind, it is likely that the emphasis on YHWH's holiness in Isa 6 has a special connotation (beside its more general sense): it seems to point to the judgement of YHWH as an aspect of his holiness.⁷⁶ One only has to compare Isa 6 with the woe-oracles in Isa 5, especially 5:16-17. Here the justice and holiness of YHWH Zebaoth (cf. Isa 6:5) manifest themselves in turning the land into deserted ruins:

"16 But the Lord of Hosts is exalted in justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy in righteousness. 17 And lambs will graze as in their pasture, and fatlings [strangers] will feed upon the ruins."⁷⁷

If this interpretation is right, one should finally remember the above mentioned connotations of the Seraphim as *dangerous beasts of the desert* in the other biblical references (above 2.3.1). Were the "burning ones" intentionally chosen by the author to underline his vision of judgement?⁷⁸ That Isa 6 is a text of multiple layers of meaning is certain. Therefore, this interpretation does not exclude others, but seems suitable to specify them. As we shall finally see, the visions of Ezekiel made their own use of the singular text, taking its meaning obviously – at least in Ezek 8-11 – as a statement of divine judgement, too.

cf. further 20; 24; 25; 28; 35). See the detailed analysis of the Hittite motif in: Hartenstein, *Unzugänglichkeit* 150-160.

75 See Hartenstein, *Unzugänglichkeit* 166-182 (above all, the explicit references of the opposition *šmm* – *ml^p* in the prophetic texts Ezek 12:19; 19:7; 30:12; 32:15 [announcements of judgment], cf. further Ezek 26:2 for the similar opposition of *h^rb* – *ml^p*).

76 See Hartenstein, *Unzugänglichkeit* 196-202.

77 Translation taken from Williamson, *Isaiah* 357 (cf. 356-376, for an exegesis of the section).

78 Then, the fact that they cover their bodies could be also understood as a sign for the judgement ahead – if they show their "burning" faces, the desolation will come; see Hartenstein, *Unzugänglichkeit* 195-196.

3.3 The Cherubim in Ezek 1-3; 8-11

The literary growth of the visions of the book of Ezekiel has been an important object of research. That there were several stages of revision, related to the process of the shaping of the Masoretic book, is no matter of dispute.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, there is no consensus which theory offers the most plausible solution. In the following outline I do not presuppose a special model of literary evolution of Ezekiel.⁸⁰ Instead, for the purpose of this article, I will consider the texts in their final shape. Then, it is important to notice the system of chronological order which connects the visions throughout the book. After the inaugural vision of the heavenly throne-sphere in Ezek 1-3, the chapters 8-11 are essential for the whole composition, because they show the judgement over Jerusalem in a visionary scenery culminating in the *departure of the glory* (*kābôd*) of YHWH from the temple and the city.⁸¹ The later part of the book, Ezek 40-48, deals with the renewal of temple and society in Judah and is also situated in a visionary context. Ezek 43:4-5 clearly refers to chapters 8-11 showing that the basis for the new salutary period ahead (after the exile) is the fact *that the glory* (*kābôd*) of God has returned to the temple from hiding (see below). It is surely not accidental that one of the great connections between the main parts of Ezekiel uses the *same paradigm as Isa 6* (as I understand it): the interruption of the contact with God in the temple, symbolized by the “darkening” or disappearance of his glory on the one hand (Isa 6 and Ezek 8-11), and the restitution of the cultic access to YHWH, symbolized by the return of his splendour, on the other hand (Ezek 43). It is likely that we here find a chain of prophetic tradition.

The superhuman beings, surrounding the throne of God, are one of the main aspects of the re-reading of Isa 6 (and other Old Testament texts) in Ezekiel. To specify the issue we shall focus on two aspects: The *change of cosmology / world-view* in the visions of Ezekiel and – depending on this change – the *new picture of the porters of the throne*. A remarkable alteration with regard to the implicit world-view is visible at once in the first verse of the book which introduces the visionary call report (Ezek 1:1):⁸²

79 See, for example, the contributions in: Lust, *Ezekiel*, and the commentary by Pohlmann, *Prophet*.

80 It should be mentioned, at least, that the voluminous commentary of Zimmerli offers a lot of very valuable observations until today; cf. Zimmerli, *Ezechiel*.

81 See Hossfeld, *Tempelvision*; Hartenstein, *Unzugänglichkeit* 140-144.

82 Cf. Zimmerli, *Ezechiel* I 46; Hartenstein, *Wolkendunkel* 148-149.

“In the thirtieth year, in the fourth (month), on the fifth day of the month, as I was among the exiles by the river Chebar, the heavens opened and I saw visions of God.”

Far away from Jerusalem YHWH's throne cannot be understood as connected solely with the temple anymore. Instead, “*the heavens opened*” – the divine king has a residence from which he is able to communicate with his prophet everywhere, even in the foreign land of captivity. One should remember that in Isa 6 there were no explicit hints where to locate the mythic abode of YHWH. This does not exclude that it was related to heaven there, too, but all the emphasis in the Isaian vision lies on the unbreakable bond joining the high raised throne of God (a variation of the symbol of a cosmic mountain) and the temple building. It was one of the consequences of the destruction of the temple 587 BCE that *the cosmic abode of YHWH gained a somewhat autonomous significance* (cf. the increasing importance of the explicit location of YHWH “in the heaven[s]” since the exile⁸³). The idea of the heavenly sanctuary in the Second Temple period was shaped more and more in detail in different traditions of the Old Testament as well as in later Jewish writings.⁸⁴ The idea – and this is important – never dissociated entirely from temple symbolism, but became increasingly a source of a creative “thinking” of the explicit monotheism of YHWH, the creator of heaven and earth.

The inaugural vision of Ezekiel on the banks of a Babylonian river is a very fine example for this development. What the prophet sees in his imagination is something new due to the situation of the exiles. The throne of God has clearly *cosmological and universal dimensions* now. The inner eye of the visionary follows its outlines from the bottom to the top, beginning with the *four porters of the throne sphere, which Ezek 10:1 identifies with the traditional Cherubim*.⁸⁵ Their appearance has changed remarkably in Ezek 1:5-14 compared with 1Kgs 6: Not only two, but four “living creatures”, forming a kind of a fourfold structure, able to move in every direction, therefore showing a general mobility. They all have the shape of a man, but with four faces and four wings (v.5-6). Their legs resemble that of a calf (v.7). Standing upright (v.7) they move simultaneously, while one pair of their wings “were joined to another” (v.9) and the other pair covers their bodies (v.11). Finally, their *faces* are all different, one is *human*, the others are that of a *lion*, a *calf* and an *eagle*

83 See Bartelmus, *šāmajim* –Himmel; Hartenstein, Unzugänglichkeit 18-22; Schmid, Himmelsgott.

84 See Ego, Tempeltheologie; Ego, Herr; Hartenstein, Wolkendunkel.

85 See about the debate of literary growth with regard to this identification Ruwe, Veränderung; Hartenstein, Wolkendunkel 141.

(v.10).⁸⁶ An important overall characteristic of these beings is finally given in v.13:

“And the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance, (was) like burning coals of fire, like the appearance of torches: it (the fire) went here and there between the living creatures; and (there was) splendour belonging to the fire, and from the fire came out lightning.”

The description at first sight obviously neglects the traditional type of the sphinx-like Cherubim of 1Kgs 6 (with the only exception that it also refers to winged porters of the throne). And it took little from the Sera-
phim of Isa 6, too (but cf. the brilliant and burning bodies of Isa 6; cf. also Isa 6:6-7 for the connexion with the burning coals of fire, see also Ezek 10:2). The description shows, as Keel elaborated, primarily new elements as compared with Isa 6, first of all *the cosmological aspects of the Cherubim*.⁸⁷ They are taken from the iconographical stock of Mesopotamian cultures (different from the Egyptian influences of Isa 6).⁸⁸ The calf's legs in combination with the shape of a winged human lead to the Akkadian *kusarikku*, the so called “bull-men”.⁸⁹ These beings were related to the Sun-god as *porters of the firmament* and as *guardians of the gateways of the Sun*. On seal decorations from Mesopotamia (1st millennium BCE) the bull-men are depicted holding up the firmament with their raised arms, while above it the winged Sun-god makes his journey over the heavens (Fig. 9). In the vision Ezek 1-3 *this cosmological concept of a firm plate, dividing the sphere of inner heavens from the earthly sky below*, has been adapted to Israelite imagery and thought (Ezek 1:22-24,26):

“22 And a likeness (was) above the heads of the living creatures, a firmament (*rāqīʿ*), like the splendour of the terrifying ice / crystal, spread out from above their heads. 23 And under the firmament (*rāqīʿ*) were their wings, stretched out straight, one towards another; and each had two wings covering these, and each two (wings) covering those, their bodies. 24 And I heard the sound of their wings like the sound of many waters, like the voice of Shadday, as they went, a sound of tumult like the sound of a camp / host. [...] 26 And from above the firmament (*rāqīʿ*), which was above their heads, (it was) like an appearance like sapphire stone / lapis lazuli, the likeness of a throne; and upon the likeness of the throne was a likeness of an appearance of a man upon it, from above.”

86 This was, of course, the inspiration for the later concept of the heavenly throne in Rev 4:6-8 as well as for the symbols of the four evangelists in Christian iconography.

87 Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen* 125-273; Keel, *Herrlichkeitserscheinung* 143-150.

88 See Keel, *Herrlichkeitserscheinung* 145; cf. further Uehlinger / Müller Trufaut, *Ezekiel*.

89 See Green, *Mischwesen* 249-250; Black / Green, *Gods* 48-49.

In an article on the evolution of the concepts of heaven in the Hebrew Bible I followed this trace at some length.⁹⁰ It is, thus, likely that the image of a sanctuary of YHWH above the firmament derived from a Mesopotamian cosmology similar to the one noted in a Neo-Assyrian cultic commentary dating to the 1st millenium BCE (KAR 307 [VAT 8917], line 30-33):⁹¹

“30 The Upper Heavens are *luludānītu*-stone. They belong to Anu. He settled the 300 Igigi inside. 31 The Middle Heavens are *saggilmud*-stone. They belong to the Igigi. Bel sat on the high dais inside, 32 in the lapis lazuli sanctuary. He made a lamp of electrum (*elmēšu*) shine inside. 33 The Lower Heavens are jasper. They belong to the stars. He drew the constellations of the gods on them.”

In this text there is the concept of three superimposed levels of the heaven, each divided from the others by a plate consisting of different stones / crystals. Interestingly enough the plate in the middle (supporting the throne) is made of a stone (*saggilmud*) which according to other references is equated with lapis lazuli and, therefore, of blue color.⁹² The lowest of the plates is made of a translucent stone (*jasper*) making it possible to look through it to the next level. In Ezek 1:22 the appearance of the only plate mentioned here (*rāqīʿ*⁹³; cf. Gen 1:6-8; Ps 150:1 etc.) is similar to ice / crystal and, therefore, transparent, too. Above it, in Ezek 1:26 (cf. Ezek 10:1), there is a *throne made of sapphire / lapis lazuli* with the human-shaped figure of YHWH's glory upon it – an obvious parallel to the enthroned god Marduk (= Bel in KAR 307:31) who sits “in a lapis lazuli sanctuary”⁹³ (line 32; cf. Exod 24:9-11⁹⁴).

In the judgement over Jerusalem and Judah, depicted in the vision Ezek 8-11, chapter 10 begins again with a visionary insight into the heavenly abode with the throne of YHWH, from which he gives the final order to burn and devastate the city, while the prophet sees simultaneously how God's glory abandons the temple (Ezek 10:1-4):

“1 And I saw, and behold, upon the firmament (*rāqīʿ*⁹⁵), which was above the heads of the Cherubim, (it was) like sapphire stone / lapis lazuli, like an

90 Hartenstein, Wolkendunkel, especially 136-152.

91 See the detailed commentary on KAR 307 by Horowitz, Geography 3-19 (from which the translation above is taken [op. cit. 4]); cf. further Livingstone, Works 82-91.

92 See Horowitz, Geography 9-11.

93 Even the yellow shining material *elmēšu*, “electrum”, from the Akkadian text (line 32) has its counterpart in the vision in the Hebrew word *ḥašmal* (Ezek 1:27; cf. Ezek 1:4; 8:2; see Ges¹⁸ Lieferung 2 408-409).

94 Exod 24:9-11, which very likely belongs to the approximately same date as the Ezekiel-references, is an independent example of the transformation of the Mesopotamian cosmological image of a heavenly abode made of sapphire / lapis lazuli; see Hartenstein, Wolkendunkel 136-152.

appearance of a likeness of a throne, appearing above them. 2 And he spoke to the man clothed in linen, and he said, 'Go in between the wheels, under the cherub, and fill your hands with coals of fire from between the Cherubim, and scatter them over the city'. And he went in before my eyes. 3 And the Cherubim were standing on the south side of the house, when the man went in; and the cloud filled (verb *mālēʿ*) the inner court. 4 And the glory (*kābôd*) of YHWH lifted himself from upon the Cherubim to the (inner) threshold of the house; and the house was filled (verb *mālēʿ*) with the cloud, and the court was full (verb *mālēʿ*) of the splendour of the glory (*kābôd*) of YHWH."

Note that the Cherubim, here situated in the temple-room, are related to the fire and the coals which are to be scattered over the city (this may be compared with the coals in Isa 6:6-7 and the above mentioned interpretation of the function of the Seraphim in Isa 6:2-4 as symbols of judgement as well). As mentioned above, we find here again also the concept of the (temple-)house "filled" (verb *mālēʿ*) with darkness (in Ezek 10:4: the cloud, in Isa 6:4: the smoke) at the very moment the glory (*kābôd*) leaves its place above the Cherubim directed towards the outside of the sanctuary (cf. Ezek 11:23 where the glory leaves the city departing to the east). The same is true with Ezek 43:4-5 where the return of the glory (*kābôd*) must be understood as the end of the hiding of the presence of YHWH and – implicitly – as the renewal of his splendour and brightness in the land.⁹⁵

"4 And the glory (*kābôd*) of YHWH had entered the house by the way of the gate whose direction is facing east. 5 And the wind / spirit lifted me up, and brought me into the inner court; and, behold, the glory (*kābôd*) of YHWH had filled (verb *mālēʿ*) the house."

Thus, the form and function of the porters of the throne (of the glory) in the visions of Ezekiel is closely related to the explicit concept of a heavenly abode of YHWH. This concept in Ezek 1-3; 8-11 (together with Ezek 43:4-5) shows that the God of the whole earth even can gather himself in hiding, leaving temple and land abandoned, while at the same time he opens the heavens to show his prophet the further things to come. The Cherubim in the Ezekiel-visions, then, are the attendants of YHWH wherever and whenever he acts from his cosmic abode, transcending widely all human boundaries. This, above all, – together with

95 Cf. also Isa 60:2 which seems to be a somewhat similar realization of the concept (see Hartenstein, Unzugänglichkeit 143 note 452). The "Return of YHWH" as a central motif of exilic / post-exilic prophecy (especially in Isa 40:1-11; 52:7-10) has now been thoroughly examined by Ehrling, Rückkehr (with extensive comparison to Ancient Near Eastern texts).

the chariot-like features added to the throne-sphere in Ezek 1; 10⁹⁶ – was the starting-point for later Jewish speculations on the Merkabah, the heavenly chariot throne.

Attachment: List of Figures



Fig. 1 Sarcophagus of Ahirom, limestone, Byblos, 1250-1150 BCE. The king seated on a sphinx throne with attendants (funeral meal?). Source: Frankfort, H., The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient (The Pelican History of Art), Harmondsworth ⁴1969, 160 Fig. 76.



Fig. 2 Carved Ivory Inlay, Megiddo, 1250-1150 BCE. The king seated on a sphinx throne and riding on a chariot. Source: Frankfort, H., The Art and Architecture of the Ancient Orient (The Pelican History of Art), Harmondsworth ⁴1969, 159 Fig. 75.

⁹⁶ See for the appearance of the wheels in Ezek 1:15-16; 10:9-10, Keel, *Jahwe-Visionen* 263-269. In Ezek 10 the wheels of the throne were depicted as somewhat independent beings with wings, faces etc. The passages about the wheels in Ezek 1 and 10 seem to be supplementary to the original text, while their interdependence is a matter of debate (cf. Zimmerli, *Ezechiel* I 28-29). In any case they were the source for their later personification as angels beside Cherubim and Seraphim in Jewish writings, then called "ophannim" (cf. the above cited passage from 1En 71:1), from the Hebrew word *ʾōpān*, "wheel" (cf. Ezek 1:15-21; 10:9-13,16-17).



Fig. 3 Stele, limestone, Sousse / Hadrametum, sanctuary Level II, second half of the 5th century BCE. Male bearded god (Melqart?) with attendant, under a canopy. *Source:* Moscati, S., *Die Phöniker. Von 1200 vor Christus bis zum Untergang Karthagos* (Kindlers Kulturgeschichte), Zürich 1966, 487 Fig. XXXV.



Fig. 4 Carved Ivory Inlay, Samaria, Iron Age II B (9th-8th century BCE). A Sshinx in front of the stylized holy tree. *Source:* Keel, O. / Uehlinger, C., *Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole. Neue Erkenntnisse zur Religionsgeschichte Kanaans und Israels aufgrund bislang unerschlossener ikonographischer Quellen* (QD 134), Freiburg / Basel / Wien 2001, 267 Fig. 232b.



Fig. 5a-b Throne, limestone, Lebanon, Southern Coast, 7th century BCE. Between the two Sshinxes on the front of the seat the stylized holy tree, on the seat a betyl / stele. *Source:* Metzger, M., *Jahwe, der Kerubenthroner, die von Keruben flankierte Palmette und Sphingenthronen aus dem Libanon*, in: Metzger, M.,

Vorderorientalische Ikonographie und Altes Testament. Gesammelte Aufsätze (Jerusalem Theologisches Forum 6), Münster 2004, 210 Fig. 157.



Fig. 6a Seal, red jasper, Iron Age II B (8th-7th century BCE). Four-winged uraeus. The name of the owner seems to be Judahite (*lyhmylyhw*). *Source*: Keel, O., *Jahwe-Visionen und Siegelkunst. Eine neue Deutung der Majestätsschilderungen in Jes 6, Ez 1 und 10 und Sach 4* (SBS 84/85), Stuttgart 1977, 109 Fig. 88.



Fig 6b Seal, lapis-lazuli, Megiddo, Iron Age II B (8th century BCE). Upper register: A pair of two-winged horned uraei facing one another (above the name of the owner: *Ṕmr*). Lower register: A lying sphinx. *Source*: Keel, O., *Jahwe-Visionen und Siegelkunst. Eine neue Deutung der Majestätsschilderungen in Jes 6, Ez 1 und 10 und Sach 4* (SBS 84/85), Stuttgart 1977, 102 Fig. 84.



Fig. 7 Seal, Palestine, Iron Age II B (8th-7th century BCE). Symmetric composition: Under a broad winged sun-disc the stylized holy tree flanked by griffins and sphinxes. Below a horus falcon between two uraei. *Source*: Keel, O., *Die Herrlichkeiterscheinung des Königsgottes in der Prophetie*, in: Irsigler, H. (ed.), *Mythisches in biblischer Bildsprache. Gestalt und Verwandlung in Prophetie und Psalmen* (QD 209), Freiburg / Basel / Wien 2004, 161 Fig. 8.

Fig. 8 Naiskos, Ramleh-limestone, vicinity of Sidon, second quarter of the 1st millenium (7th-6th century BCE?). Sphinx-throne in a rectangular framework decorated with rows of palmettes. The horizontal beam



above the niche features a row of reversed lotus flowers and buds. Above a cornice with a winged sun-disc flanked by uraei. On the top a frieze of eight horizontally arranged uraei. *Source:* Nunn, A., *Der figürliche Motivschatz Phöniziens, Syriens und Transjordaniens vom 6. bis zum 4. Jahrhundert v. Chr.* (OBO. Series Archaeologica 18), Freiburg, Schweiz / Göttingen 2000, Plate 2 Fig. 7.



Fig. 9 Cylinder Seal, modelled style, Neo-Assyrian, about 700 BCE. The anthropomorphic sun-god Shamash on a horse (on his way over the heaven). Simultaneously the upper parts of Shamash are depicted as the winged sun disc above the firmament. The plate of the heaven is supported by two bull-men (*kusarikku*). Above the

plate on the left the star of Ishtar, on the right the crescent of the moon (Sin). On the left and the right of the scene a fish-garbed and a human figure. *Source:* Black, J., Green, A., *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, London 1992, 103 Fig. 82.

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